



**Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft**

**11 | 2016**  
**Jahresausgabe 2016**

---

## Spirituality as peace work

Idea and practice of spirituality as a tool for peace in a Jewish-Palestinian community in Israel

**Annalena Groppe**

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/zjr/638>

DOI: 10.4000/zjr.638

ISSN: 1862-5886

### Publisher

Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft

### Electronic reference

Annalena Groppe, « Spirituality as peace work », *Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft* [Online], 11 | 2016, Online since 30 May 2016, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/zjr/638> ; DOI : 10.4000/zjr.638

---

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.



Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Namensnennung - Nicht-kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitung 3.0 Deutschland Lizenz.

---

# Spirituality as peace work

Idea and practice of spirituality as a tool for peace in a Jewish-Palestinian community in Israel

Annalena Groppe

---

## Introduction

- 1 It was June 2014, in a safe German city, when I first analysed my material collected in Israel. In the same time, three young Jewish Israelis were kidnapped and killed in the Westbank. As a response, the Israeli army started an air campaign in Gaza. After a short while struggling to write a thesis about spirituality and peace in those violent times, I saw pictures of solemn vigils and joint prayers for peace and the importance of the topic became clear again. Traumata in conflict regions are deep. How do people in a conflict zone deal with violence, with the feeling of powerlessness, guilt, hatred, and pain? What role does religion play in such a situation?

## Current state of research, open questions and this study's approach

- 2 Since the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, on September 11, 2001 the public interest in religion and its medial attribution to violence has remarkably increased. In the following years, Huntington's »Clash of Civilisations«, published in 1993, received wide scientific and popular recognition. It states that following the Cold-War area, culture and religion became the main sources of conflict (cf. Huntington 1993). His understanding of religions and cultures as monolithic and historical constant blocks did not remain uncriticised. Riesebrodt answers in his »Rückkehr der Religionen«<sup>1</sup> that the changing form of religious practice and the increase of fundamentalism are both a consequence of modern societal change (cf. Riesebrodt 2000, 47). One can identify a pattern that was already formulated by Luhmann in the 1970s but became increasingly important for the understanding of religion in conflict situations today. His thesis of ambivalent roles of religion says:

»Religiöse Erfahrungen können gegebene soziale Ordnungen stützen oder in Frage stellen, können den Einzelnen zu bejahenden oder zu verneinenden Haltungen führen, können konstruktiv oder destruktiv wirken oder sich auch vom einem zum anderen wandeln«<sup>2</sup> (Luhmann 1982, 11).

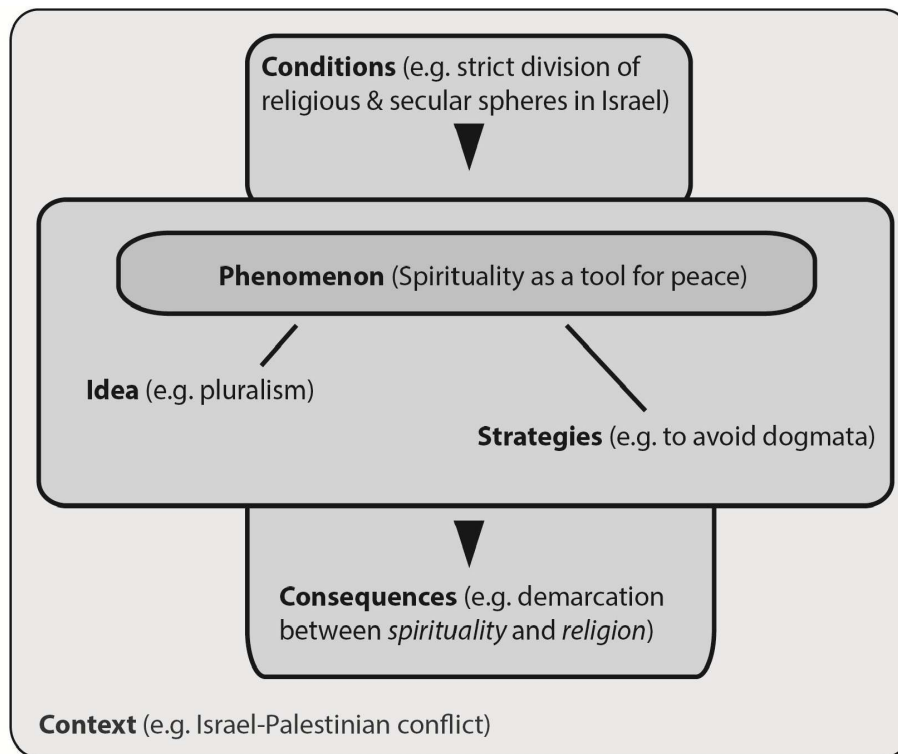
- 3 This thesis is still used for several contemporary studies on the role of religion in conflict situations. Weingardt criticises the selective distortion of the violent picture the media is painting of religion. Therefore he analyses religious actor's potentials to support peace (cf. Weingardt 2014, 10). While Weingardt takes a political position to actually promote examples of religious peace work, a recent work by Kursawe and Brenner about the role of religion in South Asian conflicts analyses the phenomenon more openly. Starting from the assumption of the ambivalence of religion in conflict situations, they identify conditions that make violent activism more likely. First, a lack of orientation and perspectives, second, rare possibilities to participate politically and socially and third, a feeling of being threatened, were identified as conditions (Kursawe, and Brenner 2013).
- 4 This research will follow the approaches of Weingardt, Kursawe and Brenner to try to shed light on religious peace activities. Rather than focussing on examples or conditions, this research will analyse the form of religiosity (e.g. spirituality) that is understood as a tool for peace.
- 5 As stated above, Huntington's »Clash of Civilisation« was widely criticised because of its simplifying and Western understanding of religion and culture. The theoretical core problem of defining religion is a widely discussed topic in religious studies<sup>3</sup>. It is not only Huntington who is struggling with the problem of subjectively distorted categorisation in empirical research and analysis of conflict situations. Kursawe and Brenner deal with this difficulty by choosing a regularly overseen area, but rarely reflect on their definition of religion. This research takes another approach and highlights the boundaries between religion and other societal fields. In order to identify different forms of religiosity, one empirical problem appears because usually the *form of religion* is understood as a matter of course within the group that is practicing it. For example, a socialised Christian would not doubt that belief is a crucial part of religion while a Jewish person might say the same about obedience. Only through encounter do differences become visible. To make characteristics communicable, one has to find/create a setting of contrast towards another form of religiosity. That is why it is crucial for this approach to use a historically new form of religiosity as a subject, which is, in this case, called spirituality by its practitioners. It therefore enables the interviewees to describe their own distinctions of religion and spirituality.
- 6 This article provides a description of how people in a community in the middle of the Israel-Palestine conflict practice and understand their spirituality as a tool for peace. It does not attempt to answer the question of whether this practice actually has an impact on the conflict situation. Both the regional and international complexity require more than the given pages. Neither does the article intend to promote spirituality in a normative way, as the morally better concept compared to religion. Instead, the analysis of both terms can give information about which function the differentiation serves and how it shapes the form of practice.
- 7 Keeping in mind those questions, I start to introduce my methods of data collection (Narrative Interviews) and data evaluation (Grounded Theory Methodology). Following this, I will present the context of my empirical research which is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (mainly the Jewish-Palestinian conflict within Israel), the religious sphere in

Israel and the peace village Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam. I will then present the results that illustrate spirituality as a tool for peace. A main result is the demarcation of spirituality and religion that is undertaken by the interviewees. This self-description taken from the empirical data will be integrated in a theoretical approach of religious studies. The conclusion of a new subjective form of religiosity and its function can widen our perspective on religion, spirituality and peace.

## Use of Narrative Interviews and Grounded Theory paradigm

- 8 As mentioned above, the methods chosen are Narrative Interviews which were analysed according to the Grounded Theory paradigm. This is because these methods provide an openness towards new concepts and interrelations, which is important for research in a yet unknown field.
- 9 Narrative Interviews consist of a short stimulus, which asks the interviewee to narrate a part of his or her biography. The researcher does not interrupt this narrative in order to preserve the structure of the narrator's process to create meaning. The advantage of Narrative Interviews especially for these cases is that the researcher does not need to bring in concepts of religiosity and therefore the interviewees will describe their understanding of religion and spirituality uninfluenced. All in all seven interviews with members of the Spiritual Center in Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam<sup>4</sup> were conducted, of which four were fully transcribed. These were selected to ensure maximum variety concerning religion, ethnicity and gender. All interviewees were socialized outside NSWAS and moved to the village to build their own family. The interviews were undertaken in English<sup>5</sup>.
- 10 Shifting to the analysing method, as the name Grounded Theory already implies, the concepts and theories are extracted from the data itself. In contrast to hypothesis-testing statistics this has the advantage that there is no need for pre-assumptions which tend to distort the results. To ensure reliability and validity, five principles were applied: (1) Theoretical Sampling, meaning that data collection and analysis alternate and refer to each other, (2) Theoretical Coding, which describes the process of giving names to phenomena within the data, (3) continuous comparison of data material and codes, (4) writing of theoretical memos and finally (5) the interplay of all these principles with each other (cf. Przyborski, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008, 194).

Figure 1: Paradigm model (cf. Strauss, and Corbin 1996, 78)



- 11 Another important part of the analysis is the paradigmatic model, which is especially relevant here because its structure is partly used to present the results later on. Strauss and Corbin expect a specific narrative structure in all data (e.g. stories, letters). It represents the way humans organize their memory and recreate scenarios while telling them to somebody who is uninformed. These parts of a narration, according to Strauss and Corbin, can be described by different types of codes. They distinguish between the *phenomenon* (here: spirituality as a tool for peace), characteristics, which can be *ideas* (e.g. pluralism) and *strategies* (e.g. to avoid dogma), and *conditions* that lead to that specific shape of the phenomenon. Even though the research identified several shaping conditions, this article will focus on one aspect: the division of secular and religious spheres in Israel. As a *consequence* of these conditions and characteristics of the phenomenon, the research identifies a sharp demarcation between religion and spirituality. This aspect is highlighted in this article because it can contribute to the discussion about the definition of religion. The *context* will be described in the following section before starting the data analysis because digressions to further background knowledge would interrupt the analysis. Nevertheless it follows aspects that were named as relevant in the interviews (cf. Strauss, and Corbin 1996, 78).

## Context of the Empirical Research

### Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam (NSWAS)

- 12 The interviewees of this research are members of a joint Jewish<sup>6</sup>-Palestinian community project. They live in the village Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam, which is located halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Since the 1970s, Jewish and Palestinian families have

decided to move there to live together as an example of peaceful relations between the conflicting parties. By the time they had settled, some of the members opened a bilingual<sup>7</sup> primary school for their children and some years later an educational centre, the School for Peace, which offers workshops for youth from all over the country, including the Palestinian territories. Within these weekend-long encounters young people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds get to know each other and discuss questions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both within and outside Israel.

## The Israel-Palestinian conflict

- 13 The questions of the political conflict do not stop at the entrance of NSWAS. The interviewees frequently refer to the conflict situation between Israelis and Palestinians. It is therefore helpful to briefly introduce the aspects of the conflict that are shaping the situation of the village and its inhabitants. As the region has been stricken by shifting periods of »cold« and »hot« war since Israel's foundation in 1948, not only the relationship towards neighbouring countries but also between Palestinian Israelis and Jewish Israelis *within* the borders of Israel is tense. The population is separated along ethnic lines in terms of geography, language and the school system. Around 20 percent of Israel's population consider themselves as Palestinians with an Israeli passport. The polarisation of the historical narratives which serve political means are especially remarkable. Following the two Intifadas at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 2000s the relationship has worsened further (cf. Wolffsohn 2007, 309ff.; Klein 2003, 8; Smootha 2010). Within this separated situation Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam serves as an example of joint living.

## The role of religion in Israel

- 14 Another relevant characteristic for this research is the religious framing of the conflict. Despite the fact that the questions between Jewish (in ethnic sense) and Palestinian Israelis are mainly about land and equal rights, there has always been religious reasoning to claim one's rights on both sides. Popular examples are Hamas on the Palestinian side, mainly located in Gaza, and the religious Jewish-orthodox settler movement in the Westbank (cf. Kippenberg 2007, 9f.). Therefore Israeli public discussion also stresses a correlation of religion and being less compromising on questions relating to the conflict. This is accompanied by a strict division of secular and religious spheres in Jewish-Israeli society (cf. Arian et al. 2012, 12f.; Hartman 2008, 14).

## The Spiritual Center

- 15 NSWAS as a peace project is also navigating through these (non-)religious spheres. This makes the village especially interesting for religious studies: next to educational projects there is another project called the Spiritual Center. It consists of two buildings of which the smaller one is an igloo-like, empty and bright House of Silence while the second and bigger one gives room for meditations, yoga classes or lectures. Three types of activities take place there: events for the community, projects related to peace and conflict and finally letting the rooms to likeminded groups outside the village in order to make the best use of them (cf. Gavron 2008, 60ff.; Rioli 2013, 44). The Spiritual Center served as an

orientation point to get to know the field and all interviewees referred to it while describing their meaning of spirituality.

**Figure 2: The House of Silence (Photograph by Annalena Groppe)**



## Idea and strategies of spirituality as a tool for peace

- <sup>16</sup> In the following, the concepts identified in the interviews are presented. The first passages will describe how the members of NSWAS's Spiritual Center understand and practice spirituality. Therefore it is useful to differentiate between the *idea* of spirituality, which is thought of as unquestionable<sup>8</sup> and the *strategies* of spirituality as tool for peace which are consciously chosen by the practitioners.



Figure 3: The Spiritual Center (Photograph by Annalena Groppe)



## Idea

- 17 In general, all practices taking place in the Spiritual Center are described as spiritual. To get a first impression, the following incomplete list can be interesting: There is (Buddhist) <sup>9</sup> meditation, yoga, mindfulness, lectures about religion, religious celebrations, having a walk through nature, exhibitions, telling life-stories and more. Considering this variety, one can suppose that the content of spirituality, for example symbols, traditions or stories, is understood in different ways within the community.

»Lydia<sup>10</sup>: it's the spiritual level. (.)<sup>11</sup> what is that mean and what you want to put there and so on it's really open, we still (.) learn this and I am sure if you sit with Esther she tell you some other things and if you will sit with others so it's really open because who knows what's really spirituality?« (L, 472ff.)

- 18 Spirituality is understood within or as a process and it is even a specific characteristic that the practice is open to differences and innovations. Thereby it is part of the concept of spirituality to have more than one truth and way of living. This can be described as *plurality*. As a reason for this plurality interviewees name the subjectivity of spirituality, meaning that each and every individual is able to shape their practice themselves. That does not at all mean that the self is always the centre of spiritual practice. Rather it means that the power to shape spirituality's content lies in the hands of the subject. Therefore several perspectives can stand next to each other.

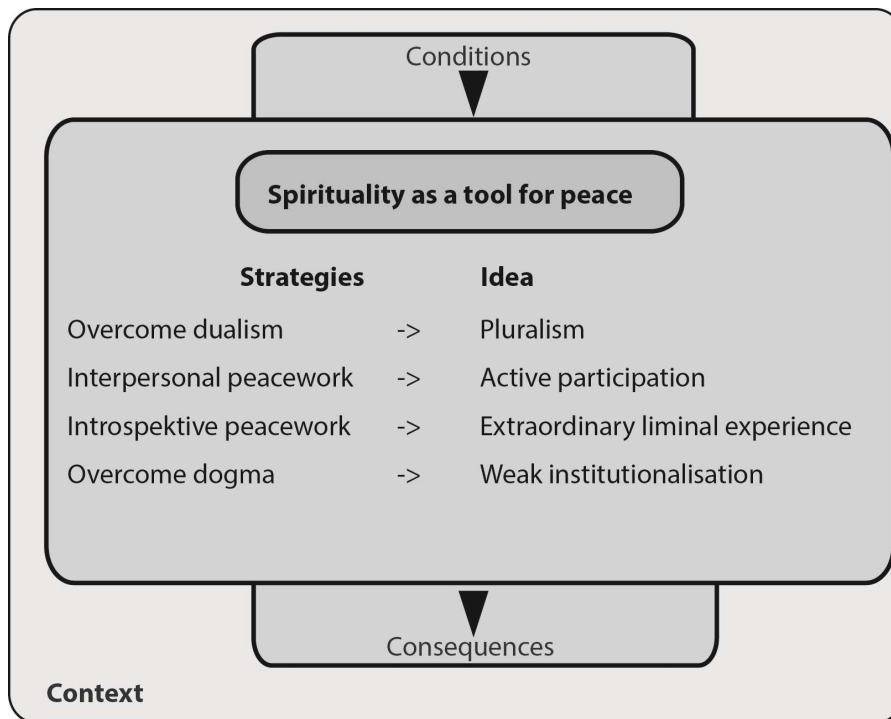
Shlomo: »because a spiritual person is someone who says (.) there is no- one truth //mmh// there is every human being has his own truth (.) and every religion (cough) is not eh the truth you know? //mh// it's a different interpretation of of the truth or the object. (.) (cough) and this is something that I have always held (.) as a concept« (Sh, 134ff.).



- 19 Despite this inherent variety, which is especially true for spiritual content, some characteristics concerning the form or structure of spirituality can be identified. Firstly, being considered spiritual requires an *active participation*, which means that people have to do something. Within the data one can find plenty of expressions such as »practice«, »put more and more effort«, »work on«. In contrast to passive experiences such as, for example, the redemption within Christianity; these descriptions highlight an active creating and shaping of actions. The practices are described as »activities« and in the case of a Muslim interviewee the term »duties« was used. In both cases spirituality is conducted by a practising subject.
- 20 Another important characteristic can be seen in the description of a *deeper level* of spiritual practices. Terms like »more«, »deeper«, »another kind of level«, »another room«, »places not like us«, »different dimension«, »own perspective« can be found in every interview and are used to describe that the experience made during practice is outside the ordinary life. Each of these quotes expresses a distinction, highlighting something that is located on the other side of a boundary. Consequently, the spiritual experience could be specified as a *liminal experience*.
- Deborah: »what I found out that together with spiritual practices like meditation (3) ehm the communication is much deeper, it's on a deeper level, we need it's it's somehow crossing the boundaries of our personalities our egos or national pride or whatever and brings it to a deeper human level of communication ehh::« (D, 169ff.).
- 21 Moreover, interviewees state that spirituality is not directly connected to the Spiritual Center but is also practised outside. One can conclude that those spiritual buildings are one place connected to spirituality, but its practice does not depend on this specific place. Nevertheless, the Spiritual Center can be seen as an institution which gives organisational and financial support along with a large contribution in terms of community building. While the director, Esther, is responsible for administration, important decisions are made by the village's committees, meaning there is no clerical structure. On the one hand, this *minimum of institutionalization*, the physical presence of the Spiritual Center, creates a feeling of comfort and security:
- Samira: »Even sometimes if you don't take part in all the activities at least you know that it's there and that you can go, it's like it's like the little child who knows that his mother is (.) behind the rock but she is there and: any time he can go running to her, giving her a hug or take a hug or kiss from her and come back to mind his own businesses« (Sa, 504ff.).
- 22 On the other hand, it also indicates that there is no permanent relationship to a group. The community structures resemble a network and for every activity, people decide whether to participate or not.
- 23 A critical characteristic for the selection of this specific community for this fieldwork is that of their contextualisation of spirituality within the Israel-Palestine conflict. In every conversation and interview, topics of conflict and spirituality are interwoven. The ideas and practices are fashioned in relation to peace work. In some interviews this is described as *spirituality as a tool for peace*.
- Deborah: »or bring non-religious people that only that can also learn [...] (.) how to create peace ehm using tools, spiritual tools from their own tra- (own) traditions« (D, 60f.).
- Samira: »I got the tools of how to fight for yourself peacefully. for your position, for your rights, for ehh:: your personality« (Sa, 435f.).

- 24 Spirituality, therefore, can be described as a method, an instrument, and it is used to strive for a goal. Spirituality does not end in itself but is seen as a tool for peace and designed accordingly.
- 25 All named characteristics, plurality concerning content of spirituality, the necessity to become active, the weak institutionalization, the importance of subjective experiences and the conscious goal-oriented use as a method, can be understood as signs of *subjectivization*. Consequently, the idea of spirituality in NSWAS can be summarized as a subjectivised form of religious practice.

Figure 4: Paradigm model (cf. Strauss, and Corbin 1996, 78)



## Strategies

- 26 If we locate the responsibility to shape the spiritual practice with each subject, it is interesting to have a look at some strategies that are used to create spirituality as a peace tool. These practices are understood as consciously chosen or goal-oriented towards peace.
- 27 With regard to the content of narratives, worldviews and ideologies, one can identify two strategies of peace-building spirituality. Firstly, the necessity is mentioned to *overcome duality by means of holism*. Symbols remain undefined and open for everybody to fill them, even though this might lead to contradictions and a lack of coherence. Secondly, the *absence of dogma* is an important condition for avoiding conflict. As already mentioned above, members of the Spiritual Center believe that there is not one single truth and therefore it is impossible to implement fixed rules.

Deborah: »it's not just obeying rules (.) eh or eh but it is eh:: really living something in your everyday live (10) somehow I think it's going beyond religious ideas it's

going beyond that beyond the idea of eh:: I am different than you:: or God is separate from me:: it's seeing the whole picture as one (3) one picture //yeah// ehm:: which of course you can also find it also in religion but not in the:: the simple interpretation of "religion" I think« (D, 271ff.).

- 28 Next to the content, one can also identify two different strategies depending on different concepts of peace. The idea of *introspective spiritual peace work* can be briefly described as »inner peace leads to outer peace«. The focus of those practices is an individual transformation process, which has consequences for society. This process is located »inside« somebody, whereby there is a relation between inside and outside. The latter is called »nature«, »universe« or »world« within the interviews. Those concepts of outer peace (e.g. equality, non-violence, absence of discrimination) and inner peace (e.g. anti-bias, acceptance, silence) are not understood as contradicting but interacting.

- 29 One characteristic related to this introspective use of spirituality is the importance of the experience of peace. As societal peace is not tangible, this desire is projected to an inner spiritual experience, and described as actually palpable.

Deborah: »so than you know I can really ehm:: (..) I can really feel that I can experience peace sometimes and eh:: not only talk about peace in the future« (D, 314f.).

- 30 The second strategy, here named *interpersonal spiritual peace work*, is characterised by a situation of dialogue. Meeting other humans within a frame that highlights each person as a subject is described as a precondition to perceive the other with his or her own perspective. As a result, different narratives are brought together and differentiate one's own point of view.

Shlomo: »could be (.) the celebration of festivals, it could be a dialogue between religions or theories in spirit (.) spiritual ehm: and (.) and it could be celebrations of a spiritual (.) nature« (Sh, 61ff.).

- 31 Inter-religious events are one, but not the only form of meetings. All interviewees describe the joint celebration of festivals within the village community as important. This sharing and exploring of traditions builds up the community spirit and increases knowledge and understanding.

Samira: »Me you Judaism Islam and of course Christians were always with us amongst us because all those who (.) eh felt like want to support us they just came and they said okay we are not fasting here we are coming to break- to have our dinner at your breaking fast time and that was really nice so ehm:: (2) we practised some of our duties together« (Sa, 297ff.).

- 32 As well as this more cognitive approach, other inter-religious activities aim towards a personal, subjective experience of religious traditions. This is done, for example, with role-plays or theatre methods. Due to this, interviewees describe that it is possible to cross boundaries on an extraordinary level, illustrated above. For example, participants describe that they can obtain a deep understanding of the meaning of religious texts of another tradition as soon as somebody tells the given story in his or her own words.

Shlomo: »to create a dialogue ehm:: through spiritual scriptures (2) but with the oral scripture in other words not through reading (.) but through the telling of (.) tales from the bible from the Quran from the New Testament. and using them as dialogue tools« (Sh, 257ff.).

- 33 There are also examples for interpersonal meetings that do not deal with texts from western religions, but use spiritual methods such as meditation to deepen the connection between people.

Deborah: »one week it was only practice and one week it was practice and dialogue. and eh for me it was a great learning (.) because the, because I-I-I was used to one kind of dialogue that is more superficial or more intellectual you know cognitive communication and arguments, maybe even expressing emotions, but eh:: what I found out that together with spiritual practices like meditation (3) ehm the communication is much deeper« (D, 165ff.).

- 34 One project worked on the inconsistencies or contradictions that come up by talking about different conflict narratives. It seems important that a joint room is created. Its symbols or stories provide a frame to sort extraordinary liminal experiences into an open system that everybody can agree on. The interviewees describe a »deep understanding« between participants.
- 35 Given the identified characteristics of spirituality in NSWAS, the following chapter describes the conditions that influence the design of practices in order to understand their function within the conflict situation.

## Demarcation of Religion and Spirituality

- 36 As illustrated above, one condition for the shape of spirituality in NSWAS is the distinction between organized religion in Israel and the village's concept of spirituality.

Lydia: »specially in this country they will use the religion in order to (.) to convince the others that this eh land belong to us not belong to the others (.) this is the Jewish side and the Islamic side believe the same, there is a lot of similarity between both of them. [...] so the=the people will think that the religion will make them will put more and more barriers between them and the others so why should it [the Spiritual Center] be? [...] but it doesn't mean that if you go deeper to a spiritual ehm point of view (.) you will be you know (.) you will put barriers between you and others, no the opposite« (L, 444ff.).

Deborah: »what I call spiritual practice is maybe to separate between the institution (.) institutionalized religion (.) and the practice itself religious practice« (D, 267ff.).

- 37 This is rooted in the opinion that religion is a cause for conflict, while spirituality can be used as a tool for peace. In Jewish-Israeli society, secularism and religiousness is strongly connected to political stands, and those groups of people are hardly overlapping. Hartman describes the rhetoric about religion as an »all-or-nothing approach« (cf. 2008, 14).
- 38 This strong division between secular and religious people in Israeli society is also a shaping factor in the understanding and practice of spirituality in NSWAS. The spiritual activists have to position themselves within this discourse. Therefore, they distance themselves from religion because it is associated with organised, dogmatic orthodoxy. Considering themselves as part of the Israeli peace movement, which is mainly secular and even anti-religious<sup>12</sup>, it seems to be more marketing-efficient to keep the door open for secular people. It also matches the self-concept of most members: five out of seven interviewees considered themselves as secular, and six out of seven have a secular family background. However, they still face suspicion: there is fear that spiritual practices might undermine the joint goal of peace.

Shlomo: »if we had to do some kind of a spiritual activity can you imagine we did like say spring we would do something lovely like:: planting a tree, dancing around it having ((many)) kids, throwing flowers, singing (.) and it was so good that next year we would say okay, we gonna do it again. //mmh// and the year after that we do it again, right? //mmh// and then suddenly we'd find out that we have created

(.) a new religion. or a new spiritual activity. //mmh// which is a plant of this and this and this and that is very frightening« (Sh, 442ff.).

- 39 As long as traditions of orthodox religion are connected to a person, or even practised temporarily, it can be accepted, legitimised by the idea of pluralism. There is a fear of slow institutionalisation and dogma, which is connected with violence.

Shlomo: »they met with this atmosphere that I have been describing (.) //mmh// of lack of (.) any (.) an- defensiveness to anything spiritual. (2) so so the spiritual center was used (.) mainly either as a meeting place, a very academic kind of meeting place for (.) thought on eeh on religions //mmh// or:: ehm (.) ehm (.) yoga. Buddhist eh activities. things that were kind of (.) okay (ironic)<sup>13</sup>« (Sh, 153ff.).

- 40 Religious traditions, such as Buddhism or Sufism, can be reintegrated through individuals. This is legitimised by the characteristic of spirituality that subjects can compile their own content. This affirms that subjectivisation is reducing the suspicion which is mainly directed against dogma and institutionalisation. The distinction towards organized religion has to be maintained.

Deborah: »many people here object to any religious activity they don't like religion at all. //mmh// in this country religion and politics go=not go so nicely together@ (.)@ [...] so some people in the village don't want to hear about peace work and religion (.) really (.) they don't want to (...) so it's not so easy to ehm:: establish you know a status in the community but slowly slowly people understand and see what we're doing (.)« (D, 420ff.).

- 41 Due to the careful use of terms, the anti-religious inhabitants of NSWAS accept the Spiritual Center and its activities to a growing extent.
- 42 In summary, the separation of religious and secular spheres within Israeli society and their connection to political positions have an impact on the clear distinctions within the Spiritual Center. To create an identity that is open for leftist peace activist who are critical of organized religion, a border is drawn around the concept of religion which is connected with the conservative, right-wing orthodoxy. Instead the concept spirituality is used.

## Spirituality and religion as different forms of religiosity

- 43 The results which were taken from the data itself can be integrated in theories of religious studies and even widen their perspective. To grasp the demarcation of spirituality and religion the understanding of religiosity should be relatively wide and therefore it is useful to describe these phenomena as two different forms of one field. This tension can be explained with Knoblauch's concept of religiosity as symbolically constructed transcendence.
- 44 First, it is necessary to point out Knoblauch's idea about what religiosity, religion and spirituality actually are. Because the meaning of the term religion is historically and culturally dynamic, he suggests using an alternative concept, which he calls *transcendence*. It is defined as the »Verbindung und Entgrenzung als Überschreitung und Überwindung dessen, was als Grenze oder Differenz angesehen werden kann«<sup>14</sup> (Knoblauch 2009, 55). The transcending of extraordinary liminal experiences, the so-called »large transcendence«<sup>15</sup>, is the main function of religion and spirituality (among others) according to Knoblauch (cf. Knoblauch 2009, 57ff.).

- 45 Identifying religiosity by means of its function (dealing with transcendence) is useful for the empirical example of NSWAS. Due to this theoretical framework, traumatic experiences of Middle Eastern conflicts can be interpreted as situations of large transcendence. By using spirituality as a tool for peace, practising persons can transcend their extraordinary experiences and therefore it becomes possible to communicate them in everyday life.

Deborah: »and the reality is not an oasis of peace and is not harmony @(. )@ // mmh// [...] and when I live in peace with the idea that you know that you know there is injustice and there is anger and there is hatred and there is discrimination (she is banging her cup on the table in time with every noun) and there is this and=there=s (2) and when I opened to that and I tried to understand the reasons and why it is like this and to open my heart and feel compassion (.) towards all sides of the conflict (2) so than you know I can really ehm:: (..) I can really feel that I can experience peace sometimes« (D, 307ff.).

- 46 Not only is the function of transcendence a characteristic of religiosity but also some specific aspects concerning its content are named by Knoblauch<sup>16</sup>. For example symbolic communication within religion or spiritual traditions usually distinguishes between two sides of a threshold such as mundane/extra-mundane or sacred/profane (referring to Weber and Durkheim) to transcend liminal experiences (cf. Knoblauch 2006, 98f.).
- 47 Within the data described above we can find this kind of symbolic communication in the idea of a deeper level of spirituality and also in the concept of inner peace. By adding attributes like »inner« or »other«, those experiences are located across the boundary but remain communicable. In fact it is only possible to communicate extraordinary experiences by relating them to ordinary experiences. The characteristics of religiosity are illustrated in the following table:

**Table 1: Symbolic and functional definition of religiosity (Knoblauch 2006, 100, translated by the author)**

|  | Mundane interpretation                      | Symbolic interpretation              |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Ordinary experience                                    | Everyday life, interactions                 | Marxism                              |
| Extraordinary liminal experience (large transcendence) | Ecstatic culture, aesthetic, art, sexuality | Religion, spirituality (religiosity) |

- 48 Spirituality, according to Knoblauch, can therefore be understood as a new form of religiosity. It is characteristic for this form to make little use of institutionalized knowledge, which is accompanied by a loss of collective traditions. Subjects re-assemble knowledge that is culturally available and are able and also forced to select according to societal expectations (cf. Knoblauch 2009, 78ff.). This correlates with the findings in this study's data, which also identify subjectivisation and goal-orientation among others as characteristics of spirituality.
- 49 On the contrary, it can also be added that the distinction of spirituality from religion is not the result of the appearance of new religious practices. In fact, the creation of spirituality followed the need to draw a line towards what is understood as religion. In contrast to Knoblauch's thesis saying that knowledge is lost, it is possible for the case of



NSWAS to speak about a conscious refusal of religion. This condition also shapes spirituality in its specific characteristics: it is compiled and practised to show an alternative. One could call the reinvention of religiosity as spirituality non-violent resistance. Moreover, it is not only refusal but also a constructive approach towards new forms of living together.

## Conclusion

- 50 This research provides possible conclusions on three different levels:
- 51 (1) The empirical results show specific characteristics of spirituality, which is understood as peace work. Summarizing those specifics, spirituality in NSWAS is an active practice that is shaped by each participating subject. It is oriented towards peace and used to handle extraordinary liminal experiences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Spiritual content is characterised by pluralism, and is based on personal experience. To design spirituality as a tool for peace, content which is undogmatic and holistic is consciously chosen. Strategies of introspective or interpersonal spiritual peace work focus on different understandings of inner and social peace. These characteristics can be explained as consequences of subjectivisation of religiosity.
- 52 (2) This specific form of religiosity is distinguished from organised religion as spirituality, in order to single out its specifics and adapt to social conditions that mark religion as violent. Consequently, one step to understand religiosity in a conflict situation is to analyse the drawn boundaries, the distinctions and its functions. Presumably the normative heritage of the concept religion, especially after the discursive change manifested in the »Clash of Civilizations« by Huntington, is not limited to the society of Israel.
- 53 (3) Integrating with broader religious research the phenomenon can be described, for example, with Knoblauch's idea of spirituality. Bringing the empirical findings and Knoblauch's theoretical terms together we can conclude that the tool for peace spirituality is symbolic communication of extra-ordinary (large) transcendence experiences, usually related to the conflict. This symbolic communication is based on subjective experiences and therefore designed pluralistically and undogmatically. Widening Knoblauch's theory, the results suggest that subjectivisation of religiosity (e.g. in the form of spirituality) does not always occur because of lost memory of institutionalised traditions, but also because of a conscious distinction drawn by the actors towards religion.
- 54 For religious studies, these results imply a new perspective on subjectivisation's impact on religion in conflict situations. Formerly used to explain fundamentalism and violence, the given example shows that subjectivisation also enables active subjects to design religiosity as a tool for peace. It highlights that religiosity can be composed in a variety of forms. In NSWAS, active subjects design their spiritual activities and they decide themselves whether these lead to peace, emancipation and equal rights, or instead to violence and discrimination. A profound analysis and understanding of the form of religiosity is therefore the first step towards conflict transformation.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arian, Asher et al. 2012. *A Portrait of Israeli Jews. Beliefs, Observance and Values of Israeli Jews, 2009*. Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute Publications. Last accessed: 06. May 2015. [https://en.idi.org.il/media/1351622/GuttmanAviChaiReport2012\\_EngFinal.pdf](https://en.idi.org.il/media/1351622/GuttmanAviChaiReport2012_EngFinal.pdf)
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gavron, Daniel. 2008. *Holy Land Mosaic: Stories of Cooperation and Coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hartman, Donniel. 2008. »The Tribes of Israel. Jewish Identities in the Jewish State«. *Havruta* 1 (2): 14–25.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1993. »The Clash of Civilizations?«. *Foreign Affairs*. Last accessed: 06. May 2015. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations>.
- Kippenberg, Hans G. 2007. »Die Entsäkularisierung des Nahostkonflikts. Von einem Konflikt zwischen Staaten zu einem Konflikt zwischen Religionsgemeinschaften«. In *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen*. Ed. by Hans Joas, and Klaus Wiegandt, 465–507. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch.
- Klein, Uta. 2003. »Einleitung«. In *Die Anderen im Innern: die arabisch-palästinensische Bevölkerung in Israel*. Ed. by Uta Klein, 7–12. Schwalbach: Wochenschau-Verlag.
- Knoblauch, Hubert. 2009. *Populäre Religion auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus-Verlag.
- Knoblauch, Hubert. 2006. »Soziologie der Spiritualität«. In *Handbuch Spiritualität: Zugänge, Traditionen, interreligiöse Prozesse*. Ed. by Karl Baier, 91–111. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Kursawe, Janet, and Verena Brenner, Ed. 2013. *Konfliktfaktor Religion?: die Rolle von Religionen in den Konflikten Südasiens*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1982. *Funktion der Religion*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Przyborski, Aglaja, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr. 2008. *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Ein Arbeitsbuch*. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. 2000. *Die Rückkehr der Religionen: Fundamentalismus und der »Kampf der Kulturen«*. München: Beck.
- Rioli, Maria Chiara. 2013. »A Christian Look at the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Bruno Hussar and the Foundation of »Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam««. *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 5. Last accessed: 06. May 2015. [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=327](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=327).
- Smootha, Sammy. 2010. *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel. Alienation and Rapprochement*. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace. Last accessed: 06. May 2015. [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW67\\_Arab-Jewish\\_Relations\\_in\\_Israel.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW67_Arab-Jewish_Relations_in_Israel.pdf).

Strauss, Anselm L., and Juliet M. Corbin. 1996. *Grounded Theory: Grundlagen Qualitativer Sozialforschung*. Weinheim: Beltz.

Weingardt, Markus A. 2014. *Was Frieden schafft: Religiöse Friedensarbeit ; Akteure, Beispiele, Methoden*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

Wolffsohn, Michael. 2007. *Israel: Geschichte, Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

## NOTES

1. In English: »Resurgence of religion« (translated by the author).
2. In English: »Religious experience can support or question social order, can lead the individual to affirmative or negating attitudes, can affect constructively or destructively or even change from one to the other« (translated by the author).
3. cf. the discussion within postcolonial studies, for example Talal Asad (1993).
4. In Hebrew and Arabic »Oasis of Peace«, in the following shortened as NSWAS, which is commonly used among the inhabitants.
5. For all interviewees and the interviewer English is a second language, but fluently spoken. As English is the common language between Arabic and Jewish inhabitants the joint meaning of concepts is produced in this second language for both groups rather than in Arabic or Hebrew.
6. Concerning the inner-Israel conflict being Jewish does not only refer to religion but is mostly used as an ethnic term to differentiate from Palestinian Israelis, because both groups' nationality is Israeli. In the following I will only use the term »Jew« in its ethnic sense and underline the religious meaning by attributes such as »practicing« or »religious«.
7. Arabic and Hebrew.
8. The self-perception and scientific analysis are not coherent in this question. Due to pragmatism the reality is produced within interaction, therefore all characteristics of a phenomenon are constructed by humans. On the other hand practicing people think of and talk about spirituality with an unchangeable core (idea) next to an influenceable and eligible shape (strategy). From an observer's point one can say that only some characteristics of spirituality are chosen consciously while others appear unquestionable.
9. The openness towards non-regional religious traditions and especially Buddhism can be significantly identified within all interviews. This highlights the possibility of a »multi-narrative« (Sh, 117). Deborah for example mentions that one teacher in the Spiritual Center could relate to Buddhism because of his experiences of Sufism, which she understands as similar (D, 494). She also names *mindfulness* as an important tool for peace and referred to teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh - both related to Buddhist tradition. Interestingly she does not name this origin, focussing on the content rather than on the religion, supposedly because she does not mean the institutionalised form in this context. Shlomo mentions experiences with a »Buddhist Jewish Reform Synagoge« (Sh, 141). The popularity of »far-eastern« practices can also be seen in connection to exceeding travelling of young Israelis to Asia after finishing their military duty. During these months-long journeys, the backpackers search for alternative ways to live and bring traditions back home to Israel (Cohen und Noy 2005).
10. All names have been anonymized.
11. For the transcription the following markers were used: (.) – short break, (3) – three seconds break, //mmh// – motivational expression of the interviewer, (cough) – remarks, ehm::: – stretched word, °religion° – low voice, @(.)@ – laughing, and=there – connect words.
12. As mentioned, the relationship between practicing and secular Jewish Israelis is tensed (cf. Arian et al. 2012, 12). Both groups distinguish themselves among others on the basis of their

political position concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict. Following Hartman, this functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy: religious groups develop homogenised political standpoints (cf. Hartman 2008, 14). Arian et al. confirm that the identification with an religious or secular group is mostly connected with an attitude to peace: »secularism« or »religiosity« is often a package deal that combines diverse characteristics and attitudes« (Arian et al. 2012, 13) – the more religious practicing, the less compromising concerning the topics of the conflict (cf. Arian et al. 2012, 25).

13. As described in footnote 9, another reference to strong Buddhist reception. One can carefully infer from this statement, that Buddhism in NSWAS is seen as a peaceful religion compared to local Judaism and Islam. This is a widely known reception of Buddhism and also widely contested (cf. Jerryson, and Juergensmeyer 2010, 3) which might explain the ironic tone of Shlomo's statement.

14. »Connecting and dissolving as crossing and overcoming of what can be seen as a boundary or difference« (translated by the author).

15. Transcending is understood as an activity mostly on a cognitive level. It already happens as soon as we interpret sensible data (such as light falling into our eyes) by means of cultural knowledge and therefore cover the world with a layer of stereotypes, terms and frames. Following Schütz and Luckmann, Knoblauch calls this activity »small transcendence«. In addition, »medium transcendence« occurs in interactions with other subjects, while »large transcendence« is experienced as soon as boundaries of ordinary experiences are crossed. This is for example the case while dreaming, when facing powerlessness during uncontrollable occurrences or in such moments in which people become aware of death (cf. Knoblauch 2009, 57ff.).

16. Knoblauch does not describe the symbols themselves because those vary widely according to time and culture. He rather focusses on their form to be communicated, which is specific for religiosity (cf. Knoblauch 2006, 98f.).

---

## ABSTRACTS

This article presents a new perspective on the role of religion in conflict situations. Narrative interviews were conducted in a joint Jewish and Palestinian village in Israel using the Spiritual Center located in the village as a reference point. The interviewees draw a picture of spirituality as a tool for peace which is characterised by pluralism, self-participation, a focus on extraordinary liminal experience, weak institutionalisation and the orientation towards peace. Moreover, they distinguish *spirituality* from the concept of *religion*, which is understood as a conflict catalyst. This perspective can be analysed with Knoblauch's concept of *religiosity* as symbolically constructed transcendence which includes both religion and spirituality, and allows their differentiation as two specific forms. Creating a better understanding of religiosity in contrast to religion can be a starting point for conflict transformation.

Dieser Artikel zeigt neue Perspektiven der Rolle von Religion in Konfliktsituationen auf. Es wurden Narrative Interviews in einer jüdisch-palästinensischen Dorfgemeinschaft in Israel durchgeführt, welche das dort vorhandene Spirituelle Zentrum als Bezugspunkt nutzen. Die Interviewten zeichnen ein Bild von Spiritualität als Friedenswerkzeug, welches durch Pluralität, aktive Partizipation, außeralltägliche Grenzerfahrungen, schwache Institutionalisierung und die Orientierung an Frieden charakterisiert ist. Außerdem grenzen sie *Spiritualität* von dem Konzept

*Religion* ab, weil letzteres als Konfliktkatalysator verstanden wird. Diese Perspektive kann mit Hubert Knoblauchs Konzept von *Religiosität* als symbolisch gedeutete Transzendenz analysiert werden. Religiosität umfasst beide Phänomene, Spiritualität und Religion, und ermöglicht es, sie als zwei spezifische Formen zu verstehen. Ein besseres Verständnis von Religiosität im Unterschied zu Religion kann am Beginn von Konflikttransformation stehen.

## INDEX

**Schlüsselwörter:** Spiritualität, Konflikttransformation, Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam, Israelisch-Palästinensischer Konflikt, Religion

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Conflict Transformation, Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Religion

## AUTHOR

### ANNALENA GROPPE

Annalena Groppe studied Social- and Religious studies at the Ruhr-University Bochum (BA) and is currently a student of the Master of Arts Program in Peace, Development, Security and International Conflict Transformation at the University of Innsbruck in Austria.

Contact: [agroppe@gmx.de](mailto:agroppe@gmx.de)